

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR
"The Intercession of the Spirit"
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Dear radio friends,

Last week on this program we looked at the great event of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. We saw then that the main work of the Spirit is to bring Jesus Christ and His blessings to the church and to the believer.

Today, we want to look at another aspect of the Spirit's work, from [Romans 8:26, 27](#), which speak of the Spirit's intercession. This is a part of the Spirit's work that we might easily overlook—partly because the Spirit does this work very quietly and without our knowing it, and partly because it received mention only once in the Bible. These verses from [Romans 8](#) are unique. And as we come to them, I hope we will see that they are amazing and very comforting.

[Romans 8](#) is one of the most beautiful and comforting chapters in all of the Bible. It is a chapter of assurance. In verse 1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." In the earlier chapters, Paul has been talking about the foundation of our assurance in our justification and forgiveness in the death of Jesus Christ. Now he brings that into real life, into the trials and the troubles that we have in life. He tells us that we should be patient in trial because we know that we have something far greater and far better awaiting us. In verse 18 he says: "I reckon that the sufferings of this [life] are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." And he talks about the longing that we have, as the children of God, for deliverance. Because we have received the Holy Spirit and are called the sons of God, we are waiting with hope for the day of deliverance of the children of God. This is the rich context of this chapter.

And in the middle of it, in verses 26 and 27, God's Word reads: "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

One of the greatest struggles in the Christian life is prayer. You will never meet a Christian who says "My prayer-life is perfect." No, every true believer wishes that he could pray better; that he would pray more often; that he would be more fervent and constant in prayer. That is because every believer desires a closer communion with the Lord. We live as sinners in a sinful and busy world. So much of our interest and time is consumed by this world. And yet, as believers, we realize that we must keep a heavenward focus in our life. We must keep praying and drawing near to God. And so prayer is something that we wrestle with as believers. It is this struggle that the text before us today addresses.

And what we should see at the beginning is that the text does not say that the Spirit helps us to pray; but, rather, that the Spirit itself makes intercession for us. He prays in our place, so that where our prayers are deficient because of the struggles we have in prayer, the Spirit fills in for us.

What is intercession? Very simply, it is to pray in behalf of someone else to God. And it should be part of every believer's own prayer-life. We should be praying for one another as Christians. We should be

praying for the church of God and the people of God all over the world. It is a great comfort and help to know that others are praying for you in your troubles. And yet, there is something quite inadequate about the intercession of others for us. Somebody will say, "I will pray for you." And we think, "Well, you can do that, but you really don't understand my need." There is a sense in which the fellow believer can never know what we experience and what we are going through.

And in that situation it is a great comfort for us to know that we have a heavenly intercessor: Jesus Christ our Savior, who knows all things, who Himself went through all our pains and sufferings, and who rules over all things for our good. Beyond these verses in [Romans 8](#), Paul goes on to talk about the intercession of Jesus.

But now, added to Jesus' intercession in heaven for us, this text tells us that we also have the Spirit praying for us. We have two divine intercessors. One of them is in heaven at God's right hand, and the other is very close to us—the Spirit who now dwells in us, the Comforter sent from God who takes up His abode in our hearts. This is a very comforting thought. He sees our life, so to speak, from ground level. He knows our hearts. He knows the struggles of our mind intimately. And He helps our infirmities by praying for us.

This intercession, we should see, is more than just the Holy Spirit helping us with our own prayers. The Holy Spirit does help us with our own prayers. In a sense, the Holy Spirit is the author of all our prayers. The Spirit of God draws us heavenward by coming into our hearts and giving us heavenly desires and longings. In the earlier verses in the chapter we read about the groaning and the sighing of the creation as it waits to be delivered from the curse of sin. And Paul says in verse 23 that we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit also groan within ourselves, waiting to be delivered. This is not the groaning and the sighing of someone who is complaining. But it is an expression of our hope. There is a day of deliverance coming for us from the curse. And the Holy Spirit, the firstfruits within us, gives us a longing for that day. The groaning and the sighings are our prayers of hope and longing for the day of deliverance. And the Spirit is the author of those.

But when the text speaks of the Spirit's intercession, it means more than just our prayers. Added to our own prayers, the Holy Spirit Himself prays for us. In the last part of verse 26, "The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us." He not only helps us to make our own prayers, but alongside of our own prayers, He Himself prays. He adds to our petitions. He does this because, in verse 26, we need it: "He helpeth our infirmities." The idea of infirmities is that we have a weakness. What is that weakness? Verse 26 identifies our weakness as this: "We know not what [to] pray as we ought." Our weakness is that we do not always know what to pray.

We should see how specific this is. Our weakness is not that we do not know how to pray. The believer knows how to pray. For example, as a Christian, you have learned the Lord's Prayer that is a pattern for your prayer-life. You know that in prayer you should come before God with reverence. You know that you should pray in the name of Jesus Christ—that God's blessings do not come to us apart from faith in Jesus Christ. The believer knows how to pray.

The believer knows also when to pray. We do not pray as often as we should. So we know that we should pray more frequently. And the believer knows that when he is in need he should look up to God in prayer for help. We know how to pray and we know when to pray. But when we come to prayer, we do not always know exactly what to pray—we do not always know exactly what to ask of God.

The context in the chapter is trials, the sufferings of this life. There are times in our life as God's children, usually when we are going through some very difficult trial, that we are brought to our knees before God and we just do not know what to say to Him. Maybe it is a sudden death—your husband or your wife or one of your children dies. And as a believer, your thoughts immediately go to God. You know that God is in control. You know that God's hand is in this. The sudden grief brings you directly and immediately into the presence of God. But, what do you say? You do not know what to say. And all you can do is cry out, "Lord, help me!" All you can say is, "Lord, Thy will is best." You sigh. You groan in yourself. But beyond that you do not know what to ask of God.

In [Psalm 39](#) David expresses this experience of the believer. He says in verse 2, “I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred.” And then in verse 9 he says, “I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it.” God had brought him into some very severe trial and he just did not know what to say. So he was silent.

That is what Paul is talking about here. We do not know what to pray as we ought. This is our infirmity. And the reason that we have this weakness is that we do not understand the entire picture of our life and the plan of God with each circumstance of our life.

[Romans 8:28](#), that is the next verse here, says, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God.” But that is the knowledge of faith. We believe it. We know it by faith. But we cannot always see it. We do not see God’s purposes. And so we do not know always what to pray.

So the text says that the Spirit helpeth our infirmities. The idea of this word “help” is to come alongside of someone who has a great burden that he cannot carry alone and to take that burden on yourself and to make it yours. The idea is that the Spirit comes to us in our problems. And He makes them His own. He takes ownership of them, and He brings them to God in prayer in our behalf.

He is able to do this because He not only knows our problems but He knows perfectly the purposes of God in them. He can see what we cannot always see. Verse 27 explains that to us this way, “He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.” Because the Spirit Himself is God, He knows the will of God perfectly. And He knows it for me and for you personally. He has a full understanding of God’s will for every believer. The will of God for each believer encompasses every event in his life. In Psalm 73 it is an individual believer who says, “Thou shalt guide me by thy counsel.” The Holy Spirit, who comes to each believer, knows the will and the counsel of God for that individual.

And in His intercession, this is what He does. He takes what is weighing on our heart, our burdens, which we do not know how to express but which He knows. He takes them and He brings them into conformity with the will of God and prays the perfect prayer to God on our behalf.

Let me give you an example of that from Scripture. Paul, you remember from II Corinthians 12, prayed that God would take away his thorn in the flesh. But that was not the will of God, was it? No. God had a greater purpose in Paul’s life with that thorn. But Paul, thinking it would be best for himself that God remove this, asked God to take it away—three times. But God tells Paul to stop making this petition. And Paul learns to see that God’s way is right—that this trouble in his life that he wants removed is actually helping him spiritually and keeping him from personal pride. From his own limited point of view, he did not see this. He saw the thorn in the flesh as a hindrance to his work. But the Holy Spirit was able to see God’s purpose in it. And so, when Paul made his prayer, the Holy Spirit came alongside what Paul did and made a different intercession for Paul. Paul did not know what he should pray, and so he prayed the wrong thing. But the Holy Spirit corrected this prayer and, with time, Paul came to see that this thorn was good for him, and he stopped asking God to take it away.

That is the idea here. We do not know what to pray. And then the Holy Spirit, as part of His work in the believer, takes not what we see as our need, but He takes what is best for us. And He makes His prayer to God in our behalf, with our best interest in mind.

Because of this, sometimes God will surprise us in the answers that He gives to our prayers. Instead of giving us what we wanted, He gives us something different. He gives us more than we ask. He gives us things that we would never have thought to ask. He gives us exceeding abundantly, above all that we could ask or think. He gives us the things that the Holy Spirit sees as our need and asks for us.

So we have this double intercession. Christ in heaven, who has earned the blessings of God for us; and the Spirit in our hearts, who knows us intimately, who is aware of exactly what we need and knows the purposes of God for our life.

Now what exactly does the Spirit say to God? The text says that He makes this intercession with groanings which cannot be uttered. Do you know what that means? It means that the Spirit’s prayers in our behalf are so deep and profound and comprehensive that they cannot be put into human words—that

it is beyond the realm of our mental capacity to comprehend what the Spirit prays for us. When the Spirit makes intercession for us, this is God communicating with God. It is God-talk. And so we cannot understand it. I suppose it is something like parent-talk. Sometimes a husband and a wife will confer with one another in private about something in the life of their child. And they prefer that the child not hear them. As parents, they have the child's best interest in mind. But if the child heard everything that they said about the situation, it would not make sense to the child. The child does not always, at the time, understand why his parents deal with him in a certain way. But from the parents' point of view, it is for the good of the child—out of their love for the child, with their son's best interest in mind.

This God-talk is something like that. When God talks with Himself, when the Spirit talks to the Father about us, when Jesus our Savior makes intercession for us, then the concern of the triune God is always our good and our salvation. But God keeps these discussions to Himself. He hides His purposes from us in our life because it is better that we do not know now exactly what His purposes are. It is better that we wait till glory, till heaven, to see how all things work for our good.

The Christian life has been compared to a tapestry. We see the bottom side of it, with all the knots and the stitches. And sometimes it is a confusion of color to us. But God, as the One who weaves the tapestry, sees it from the top. And He is perfectly weaving every event of our life together to bring us to perfection with Himself. When we get to heaven, then we will see it all and will understand it.

So this is the Spirit's intercession. And the comfort of it for us is that we will always receive the best answer to our prayers. Because of the Spirit's intercession, all our needs are brought perfectly into the presence of God. No, I did not say that we will always get the answers that we want to our prayers. If God did that, it would not be good for us. Imagine how messed up our lives would be if God would just give us everything that we wanted and asked. Sometimes we pray and God does not answer according to our petition. That is just as well. It was just as well that God did not take the thorn from Paul but instead taught him the sufficiency of His grace.

You and I should look at our lives that way, too. Because the Holy Spirit is praying for us, all things work together for good in our lives. God may not be answering your petition as you want, but He does answer the superior petitions of the Holy Spirit for you.

That gives us great confidence and assurance as we go through life—confidence to go on, to go on with hope.

We may not know what to pray. So we groan and we sigh, longing to be delivered from the present troubles of this life. But you should not let those groans and those sighs weigh you down. Satan will come to you sometimes and say, "Well, God obviously doesn't care about you or love you." But that is not true. These groans and these sighs of the Christian are a proof of God's love and care. They are the witness of the Spirit in our hearts that we are the children of God. They are the longings of the sons of God that come from the Spirit to be delivered. They are the Spirit, in us, drawing us after God toward things eternal.

Let us pray.

Lord, how thankful we are that when we do not understand things in our lives, when we do not know what to pray, then we have the Spirit of Christ who does know what we need and who perfectly presents our prayers to Thee so that we are given just what we need in answer to our situation in life. Comfort us, Lord, by this knowledge, we pray. For Jesus' sake, Amen.